Kant and the Problem of Demandingness: Introduction

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In the Second *Critique*, Kant criticizes the Stoics for 'straining the moral capacities of a *human being* … far beyond all the limits of his nature' (CPrR, 5: 127.2-3). The Stoic conception of virtue is unfit for human beings, since the ideal Stoic agent, the sage, is presented as a 'divinity', an entity 'independent of nature' for whom happiness is of no special relevance (5: 126.14-127.16). In the *Metaphysics of Morals,* Kant warns of the 'fantastically virtuous' character who is 'too virtuous' and thinks that duty has to be considered in every decision. This would turn virtue into a 'tyranny' (MM, 6: 409.13-19).[1] Kant thinks that a moral theory can be criticized, if, due to an unrealistic conception of human capabilities, it prescribes that finite human beings achieve an impossible ideal, or if it requires that agents exhaust themselves thinking constantly about small or morally insignificant matters as if they constituted genuine moral quandaries. Kant here levels a version of what we nowadays would call the Overdemandingness Objection.

There are clear indications that Kant himself conceives of his own theory as not threatened by any of these and related problems. In the context of his deduction in *Groundwork* III, he expresses the view that moral oughts are rational willings, i.e. that an agent, insofar as she is rational, does not even experience morality as a demand (G, 4: 455.7-9) – an optimism that certainly can be called 'astonishing' (Timmermann 2007: 143). Kant also states that how much an agent should extend his beneficence 'must be left to each to decide for himself' (MM, 6: 393.28-29). He seems to think that moral demands, correctly understood, leave ample room for non-moral (though never for immoral) activities. In his late works, Kant even

indicates that morality and happiness can go together quite well (Rel, 6: 24n.26-27; MM, 6: 484.20-29; Ped, 9: 485.5-6), and that morality can be a source of happiness (MM, 6: 378.8-18).

Nonetheless, predecessors of our current debate on overdemandingness and related objections were already levelled against Kant, for instance, by Hegel (1991: §135; 1976: V.C.c., VI.C.a-b). Hegel (1976: VI.C.a) argues that, according to Kant's transcendental idealism, there is necessarily 'disharmony' between duty and nature and moral agents' good intentions are thus frequently frustrated. A state of harmony between duty and nature, which would enable agents to perform moral actions in the world of experience, is only a postulate and the actualization of this harmony is eternally deferred. According to Hegel, Kantian morality thus requires agents to act in a metaphysically impossible way, namely, to actualize their pure practical reason in a sensuous world that leaves no room for such an exercise. This constitutes a form of overdemandingness, since agents are supposedly morally required to go beyond what we can reasonably expect of them as finite agents and even beyond what they can do, period.

There is currently growing interest in the limits of morality and related topics such as *Ought Implies Can* (e.g. van Ackeren and Kühler 2016), supererogation and feasibility. In particular, the debate on (over-)demandingness has evolved greatly over the last decade. We can distinguish two strands of this debate, namely, one concerning demandingness and one concerning overdemandingness. The debate on demandingness addresses questions concerning what demandingness, understood as a conflict between morality and self-interest, is, and whether these conflicts are conceptually necessary (Finlay 2008), empirically necessary in the sense of being necessary given the current conditions of the world (Crisp 1996), or rather impossible as ancient eudaemonists have claimed.

The debate on overdemandingness and related objections against normative moral theories focuses on questions such as whether and how we can distinguish between plausible and excessive demands; which aspects or claims of a normative theory are the sources of overdemandingness; and whether we should revise theories which make excessive demands or even reject them for being unfit for human agents (see Hooker 2009, Scheffler 1992). There is currently no well-established family tree that captures the main variants of overdemandingness objections, such as the integrity objection (Williams 1985) as well as problems pertaining to a potential excessive scope of morality (Fishkin 1982), unfairness (Murphy 1993), psychological difficulty (McElwee 2016) or confinement (Benn 2016). Furthermore, there are different ways of establishing a demarcation line between acceptable demandingness and overdemandingness: a level of well-being that an agent always has a prerogative to preserve, a fixed limit to the total amount of sacrifice that can be required of agents for the sake of morality, certain goods that morality cannot require that we give up, etc.

The accusation that a theory is overdemanding in its current form is commonly considered as a reaction to certain forms of consequentialism and rescue principles.[2] It is important to note though, that this represents a very restricted perspective on the demandingness debate. A number of central and influential attacks on modern ethical theories, for instance by Wolf (1982) and Williams (1985), are directed against Kantianism as well as consequentialism. Both Kantianism and consequentialism are criticized for being overly detached from our moral experiences and from what gives our lives meaning. Modern ethical theories, according to their critics, threaten to neglect or diminish the importance of personal ground projects, goals and values or the weight of personal non-moral reasons. Williams even took Kant to be the grandfather of the infamous modern morality-system of which utilitarianism is just a variant and which generally is overdemanding (1985, esp.ch.10).

Though Kantian ethics was an important opponent for Williams, Wolf, Foot, etc., the debates on demandingness and overdemandingness seem to have lost interest in Kantian ethics, until a decade or so ago.[3] Recently, however, the debate has returned to Kant. A number of philosophers have proposed that if overdemandingness is a problem for an ethical theory, Kant is in a relatively strong position to avoid overdemandingness problems. Igneski (2008) argues that, in a Kantian framework, agents must have free space to set and pursue their own personal ends. If autonomy 'is something we truly value then we should not be required to give it up ourselves' (ibid.: 441). Pinheiro Walla (2015) argues that Kant's duty of beneficence has built-in limitations on how much is required of agents. Stohr (2011: 46) even goes so far as to claim that utilitarians could criticize Kant for being underdemanding or that 'Kantianism is not adequately demanding when it comes to beneficence'.[4]

There are at least three reasons why a more in-depth discussion of Kant and (over-)demandingness, as the authors in the present exchange provide it, is still a desideratum.

Firstly, consequentialists frequently point out that overdemandingness is not a potential problem for them alone but also for Kantians. Singer and Lazari-Radek (2014: 324) recently claimed that Kantian theory is highly demanding, but as evidence they only vaguely refer to Ashford's (2000, 2003) and Ashford's and Mulgan's (2012) discussion of the demandingness of *contractualism*. Likewise, Mulgan (2001: 5-6) charges Kant with overdemandingness, but his suggestions for how the debate could be applied to Kant are unspecific and brief and this makes it difficult to critically evaluate his assessment. Since overdemandingness is considered one of the main problems for consequentialism, a discussion of how Kant handles (over-)demandingness is a central step in finding an answer to the question: What is the best ethical theory?

Secondly, unlike ancient eudaemonists Kant acknowledges that there can be conflicts between the demands of duty and the well-being of agents. Unlike the modern proponents of an overdemandingness objection, Kant does not necessarily take these conflicts to indicate that we have to alter what morality can demand of us. Kantian moral theory provides a different approach and different solutions to problems currently the subject-matter of a fierce debate.

Thirdly, Kant assumes a richer picture of duties than just the requirement to do as much good as one can. In Kant's ethical writings we find discussions of absolute prohibitions against forms of mistreatment and exploitation, as well as discussions of what agents owe to themselves and to loved ones. These duties are often overlooked in the current (over-)demandingness debate and can enrich the conceptual framework of this debate.

The current collection contains two new essays on Kant and (over-)demandingness and critical responses to the essays by leading scholars in the overdemandingness debate. The topics range from questions pertaining to the authority of morality, to latitude and the validity of the overdemandingness objection itself. Of the main papers, Jens Timmermann is open to the possibility that Kant's ethics is indeed very demanding but maintains that this does not constitute a problem for Kant. Unlike many other Kantians he does not seek to defend Kant's ethics via appeal to latitude but rather pursues a number of underexplored options, pertaining to how duty is imposed on agents, that Kantian ethics does not demand that we always perform the morally optimal action, and that Kant acknowledges that agents must undergo a process of moral development. The second paper discusses Kant's strong version of moral rationalism, which Marcel van Ackeren and Martin Sticker refer to as 'silencing'. They argue that silencing can make perfect duties very demanding. However, silencing does not require that agents do all they can in the case of *imperfect* duties. Once more, this is a strategy that explores other options than the traditional issues related to latitude.[5]

Notes

[1] The context of this attack is Kant's discussion of the status of *adiaphora* – see Rel, 6: 23n.; MM, 6: 222.35-223.17, 409.13-19; L-Eth Vigil, 27: 512.14-29. The following abbreviations are used: G: *Groundwork*, CPrR: *Critique of Practical Reason*, Rel: *Religion*, MM: *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ped: *Pedagogy*, L-Eth Vigil: *Lecture notes Vigilantius*. Our translations follow Kant (1996).

[2] The most influential of these rescue principles is presented in Singer (1972). See Kagan (1989) for an early influential defense of consequentialism against the overdemandingness objection.

[3] An exception is an older paper by O'Neill (1993: 459) in which she argues that Kantianism is significantly less demanding than utilitarianism since Kant's focus is on omitting acts of injustice, not on promoting ends.

[4] Furthermore, see recent papers on the topic by Timmermann (2005), O'Neill (2009), Vogt (2008). These papers all argue that Kant's ethics is not overdemanding or they at least suggest such a conclusion. An exception is van Ackeren and Sticker (2015), who argue that perfect duties can be criticized for their demandingness.

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